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## Pun in Advertising From the Perspective of Figure-Ground Theory

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### Abstract

As a flexible rhetorical device, pun is widely adopted by advertisers because of its brevity and novelty. For a long time, scholars have studied pun from different perspectives and focused on translation, pragmatics and aesthetics. This paper will study puns in advertising from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, and further analyze the cognitive mechanism of pun in advertising within the framework of Figure-Ground Theory. Based on the analysis of specific examples, we draw the conclusion that puns in advertisement not only has the features of ambiguity and double context, but conforms to the characteristics of figure and ground.

**Key words:** Pun; Figure-ground theory; Cognitive mechanism; Advertisement

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### INTRODUCTION

The presence and development of advertising has encouraged a great amount of studies, which are mainly focused on advertising language. Pun, as a flexible figure of speech, is actually a kind of play on words and plays an important role in advertisements. In this paper, much attention will turn to puns in advertising. In advertisements-processing, lots of rhetorical devices are frequently adopted, among which pun performs a more attractive role. In general, pun in advertising contains two

or more than two implications. When customers try to interpret the deep information of an advertisement with pun, he or she may feel a sense of achievement, then the purpose of advertisers can be attained—to draw the attention of customers. This can be proved by Van Mulken et al. (2005, p.708) that “a pun can be considered as a riddle. Solving a riddle is a pleasant experience, because it flatters the audience’s intellectual capabilities by showing them that they have the relevant knowledge to solve them.”

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Advertising” stems from a Latin word “advertere”, which means attracting others’ attention. With the evolution of advertising, more and more scholars begin to concentrate their minds on it, and give different definitions on advertising. Bovee (1992) believes that: “Advertising is the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media.” Consterdine (2002) holds that the purpose of advertising is to inform clients about products and services, then persuade them to purchase. Longman Advanced American Dictionary (2007) defines advertising as the activity or business of advertising things on television, in newspaper etc.. For the present paper, advertising serves such purposes as for the public welfare and for commerce. The focus of this paper is on commercial advertising, especially the advertising pun in commercial advertisements. Thus, the commercial advertising is the carrier to convey some information which is involved with the business activity.

In the late of twentieth century, more and more puns in advertising are applied in various advertisements. Meanwhile, researchers begin to pay more attention to this special figure of speech. Most of their studies pun from the perspective of pragmatics, aesthetics and translations, few analyzed it from cognitive fields. From

the perspective of cognitive linguistics, some researchers studies pun from the perspective of Relevance Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory.

Some studies analyze the definition and characteristics of pun in advertisements, and analyze advertising pun from the perspective of figure-ground theory. However, the study fails to mention the cognitive mechanism of figure-ground theory. Tian (2010) applies Figure-Ground Theory to explain the pun and its inner cognitive mechanism. She holds that "pun" is a marked language, and sentences with pun is a typical focus sentence, whose focus mainly count upon the speaker's purpose. Other studies investigate advertising pun from the perspective of Conceptual Integration Theory. Yao (2004) draws that what the advertising pun expresses is the Emergent Structure in conceptual blending, and the process of decoding advertising pun can be called conceptual unpacking. Lu (2008) and Yuan (2009) analyze homophone and homograph with several examples, but Lu (2009) adds homophone & homograph in the analysis of advertising pun. On the basis of Figure-Ground Theory, Yuan (2009) and Tian (2010) study advertising pun according to the definition and F-G Theory. Through the study, Tian (2010) discovers "pun" is a marked language and typical focus sentence. According to Relevance Theory, Gan (2011) analyzes puns in advertising on puns with one intended meaning and with two or more intended meaning, and Gan (2011) concludes four functions of advertising pun. With cognitive theoretical framework, Yang (2011) elaborates four kinds of puns: homonymy, polysemy, parody and grammar and obtains the same conclusion with Tian (2010).

From the previous discussion, we can generalize the following key features of advertising. Firstly, advertising involves commercial activities. Generally speaking, the ultimate purpose of commercial advertising is to gain high profit. Secondly, advertising has the informative and persuasive functions (Tanaka, 1992). That is, advertisers inform customers with information about the products that they promote, then persuade the customers to decide to buy them. Thirdly, the wording of advertising is easy to understand and mainly uses spoken language. For example, "To me, the past is black and white, but the future is always color." This is an advertisement for Hennessy, which directly tells the audiences that they'll enjoy the colorful life in the future when they taste this kind of wine. Fourthly, figurative devices are frequently adopted in advertising, such as parody, pun, personification, metaphor and simile, etc..

## 2. FIGURE-GROUND THEORY

In 1915, Edgar Rubin, a Danish psychologist firstly introduced this academic theory and applied it into psychology. Then, Gestalt psychologists adopted Figure-Ground Theory to explore perceptual organization

(esp. visual and auditory perceptual organization). In 1970s, Leonard Talmy, a renowned cognitive linguist, was the pioneer to employ the theory to study linguistic phenomena. Ronald Langacker, as the founder of cognitive grammar, introduced two concepts "trajector" and "landmark" in place of "figure" and "ground".

In daily life, majorities of people pay more attention to the objects which are more prominent and more salient, while likely ignore the things which are less prominent and less salient. According to Figure-Ground Theory, the more prominent things can be considered as "figure", accordingly the less salient can be considered as "ground". According to the observation to the face/vase illusion, nobody can focus their minds on the two illusions at the same time. However, they can recognize one of them one by one effortlessly. This cognitive phenomenon can be named as Figure-Ground Segregation. When we observe some object in the surroundings, usually we will regard the object as prominent "figure", and consider the surroundings as "ground" in perception. (Kuang & Wen, 2003). This cognitive phenomenon can be explained by Prominence Principle, which is the basis of Figure-Ground Theory. Psychologists believe perception fields can always be divided into "figure" and "ground". In detail, "figure" is more salient and attractive to people, while "ground" is less prominent, obscure in detail and undivided. Langacker (1993) argues that the perception of "figure" and "ground" is the direct result of human's practice for people always use one object or concept as a reference point to illustrate another object or concept, and "ground" in this condition is the cognitive reference-point of "figure".

In Gestalt psychologists' view, the determination of "figure" should follow the Principle of Prägnanz. That is, the "figure" must be smaller and movable with gestalt feature. Tian (2010) analyzes the cognitive mechanism of pun in advertising from the distribution of information and speech structure and reveals that "pun" is a kind of marked language and a typical focus sentence whose focus mainly depends upon the speaker's intention. However, the determination of "figure" does not depend upon the focus of the audience but upon the Principle of Prägnanz.

Kuang and Wen (2003) describes that we generally regard "book" as "figure" and "table" as "ground" if there is a book on a table, for "book" is obviously smaller than "table". Thus, we can say "the book is on the table." or "there is a book on the table." instead of "the table is under the book.". If we understand sentences all like this, we may breach the Principle of Prägnanz. However, not every sentence is in line with the principle.

## 3. PUN AND ADVERTISING

### 3.1 Definitions of Pun

Different dictionaries and scholars have defined pun from different perspectives. According to COD (The Concise

Oxford Dictionary) which is famous for its accurate definition, pun is the humorous use of word to suggest different meanings, or words of the same or similar sound with different meanings. Zeiger (1978) defines pun or paronomasia as play on words which sound alike but which have different meanings. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) gives pun such a definition “the use of a word in such a way to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect”. Li (1992) believes that under a certain linguistic environment, a pun takes advantage of sound and meaning to give a sentence double context, and expresses one thing but implies another. According to *English Rhetoric*, pun is a play on words, which involves an amusing use of expressions with double meanings or the same sound but different meanings.

In accordance with the above definitions, it is not so difficult to get such key points of pun: Pun is a rhetorical device which applies words with different meanings or with the same sound but different meanings. In the following discussion, we will focus on two puns: homophone and homograph.

### 3.2 Characteristics of Pun

For the flexibility and diversity of puns, designers frequently apply puns in advertisements. The following characteristics make puns a favorite of advertisements. Some keywords on characteristics of advertising are:

#### 3.2.1 Ambiguity

Tanaka (1994) holds that puns raise the awkward problem of the presence of ambiguity in language. Therefore, one characteristic of pun is ambiguity. In most cases, people manage to avoid vagueness and prefer to make themselves understood quickly and lightly. However, pun in advertising is to create ambiguity in meaning on purpose.

#### 3.2.2 Economy

Redfern(1982, p.269) ever state:

Advertising space is costly. Economy is essential. Puns are highly economical (two meanings for the price of one word or phrase) and are in fact much more of a labor-saving device than many of the products they seek to promote.

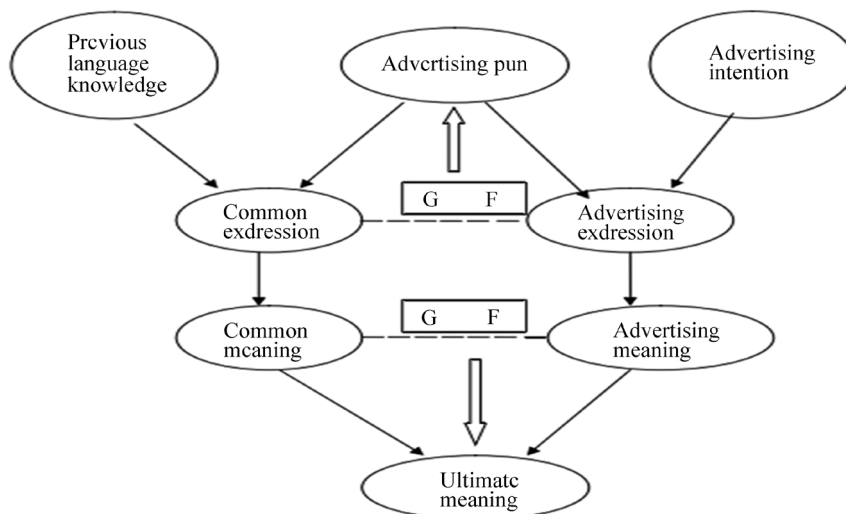
#### 3.2.3 Double Context

In Archibald A. Hill’s opinion, a pun is usually built on three conditions: double context, the hinge (the word used as a pun), and a trigger (the elements which make the pun possible). Yan (2002) argues that expression with pun is a kind of implicit performative, and its intention can be understood only in a given context. Double context contains explicit context and implicit context.

## 4. INTERPRETATION OF FIGURE-GROUND THEORY IN PUN IN ADVERTISING

The main feature of pun is the prominence and salience, which also can be deemed as the functions of advertising pun from the perspective of figure. Meanwhile, the functions of pun in advertising from “ground” also can associate with the characteristics of “ground”. “Ground” may play the role of supporting the salient things all the time. Similarly, in advertisements, the less salient information always serves as the background which supports the “figure”.

In the process of interpreting puns in advertising, the audiences must understand the literal meaning and grab the hidden meaning. Similarly, Zhao (2013) depicts the process of interpreting puns in advertising from figure-ground theory with the following diagram.



**Figure 1**  
Explaining Pun in Advertising With Figure-Ground Theory (from Zhao, 2013)

According to this process of interpretation, the paper will analyze two kinds of pun, homophone and homograph in advertising with relative examples.

#### 4.1 Homophone

Homophones are words which are pronounced in the same way but have different meanings and spellings. With these special features, homophones are welcomed by advertisers.

Example 1: “一贯”好奶粉.

This is an advertisement designed for FIRMUS milk powder, which takes advantage of the same pronunciation “yiguan” between “一罐” and “一贯”. The phrase “一罐” is the quantifier to modify the milk powder, while the phrase “一贯” means “one characteristic of somebody or something is always consistent and unchanged”. In this advertisement, the advertiser intends to express that FIRMUS milk powder always has good quality and rich nutrition. In fact, this advertisement employs a pun. The two modifiers, “一罐” and “一贯”, form double context: one is a jar of good milk powder, the other is the jar of milk power always has good quality.

In the interpretation of the advertisement, the audience have the previous knowledge of “一罐” and “一贯”, then understand the advertising meaning by means of the advertising pun “guan”, finally the audience grab the intention of advertisement: “the jar of FIRMUS milk powder is consistently good in quality and rich in nutrition.” Therefore, the previous knowledge can be regarded as “ground”, and the advertising pun acts as the junction of meaning, and the ultimate meaning is the prominent “figure”.

Example 2: Trust us. Over 5,000 ears of experience.

The advertisement is for hearing aid, which also uses homophonic pun. Literally, this expression shows that this kind of hearing aid stands the test from numerous customers. In the deep sense, the advertiser employs a pair of puns—“ears” and “years”, which exhibit the long history and superior quality of this product. “Year” has the same pronunciation with “ear”, which may create ambiguity. For different listeners, some may think that the hearing aid has been examined by 5,000 ears, and some may believe that the hearing aid has ancient history. It is the different understandings that give rise to the ambiguity of this advertisement. Hence, it draws more attention from the audience. According to figure-ground theory, here “ears” serves as the junction which links the surface meaning and deep intention, in other word, “ground” and “figure”. “ear” and “year” both have the possibility to be “figure” or “ground”, which depend on the audiences’ focus. Both interpretation, however, benefits the advertisement.

#### 4.2 Homograph

Homographs are words which are spelt in the same way but have different meanings, and may have different pronunciations.

Example 1: You’ll go nuts for the nuts you get in NUX.

In this advertisement, the audience comprehends the phrase “go nuts”. In literal meaning, it refers to the purchasing of nuts, and the other meaning is “becoming crazy”. The two meanings of “go nuts” create the ambiguity of this advertisement. It is the ambiguity of the advertising that attracts customers’ attention. Therefore, the audiences may understand the advertisement as “you will become crazy for NUX’ nuts”. So the intention of the advertisement is to show the mysterious charming of NUX’s nuts. Obviously, the second meaning is more salient, which can be treated as “figure”. Correspondingly, the first meaning is the “ground”, which supports the crazy nut.

Example 2: Try our sweet corn, you will smile from ear to ear.

It is an advertisement to promote the sweet corn. In this advertisement, the designers have two purposes. One is to show that our sweet corn is so delicious that everyone wants to eat them. The other is to express that our sweet corn is so delicious, you will smile happily when eating. Thus, the two purposes can be regraded as double context.

In the author’s mind, the two information is equally important. Hence, the choosing of “figure” and “ground” completely depends on the audiences’ intention.

From the previous analysis, we can generalize the detailed cognitive mechanism of advertising pun from figure-ground theory. The audience should have previous knowledge which is relevant to the expression of an advertisement and further single out the prominent information, which is generally expressed by punning word. Finally the audience can get the real intention on the basis of the overall understanding of information provided in the advertisement.

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## CONCLUSION

We analyzed puns in advertising from the perspective of figure-ground theory. The kernel of this theory is figure-ground segregation. In perception fields, the audience tends to pay close attention to the prominent and salient object, and treats the less prominent and less salient object as the background. The former objects are “figure”, and the latter one is “ground”. The paper classifies puns as homophone and homograph, and manages to analyze pun in advertising with examples based on figure-ground theory. Combining with the characteristics of pun, figure and ground, the present paper analyzes the ambiguity and double context of pun, and points out the figure and the ground in advertisements.

The present paper believes that the knowledge of Figure-Ground Theory is far more than what we commonly accepted that figure is more prominent and attractive, generally smaller and concrete, while ground is comparatively less prominent, generally bigger and

abstract. We can also probe into the deep information, especially the cognitive mechanism of this theory.

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